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Intro

CU Innovators showcases the extraordinary people of the University of Colorado who are transforming life as we know it and how we envision the future. Through their research, teaching, creativity, entrepreneurship and collaboration, these innovators are forging new knowledge, new ways of doing and new possibilities for our state, nation and world.

Hello and thank you for joining us today. I'm Emily Davies and I recently had the great pleasure of speaking with Dr. Reiland Rabaka, Professor of African, African American and Caribbean Studies at CU Boulder and Director of CU's Center for African and African American Studies, commonly known as "The CAAAS" (pronounced cause).

In this episode Dr. Rabaka tell us how The CAAAS went from a vision to a reality. And we learn about his own journey to academia and how he works to build the beloved community every day at CU and beyond.

START

Well, Professor Rebaka, thank you so much for joining us today. I saw that you were delivering something along the lines of nine Martin Luther King Day speeches within a two-week period this month on top of the spring semester starting, which is also on top of your research and teaching and your responsibilities as director of the CAAAS. So thank you for making time for us today.

Thank you very much. With that, with that introduction, I feel like James Brown, the hardest working man at the University of Colorado. Yeah, baby!

As you know, President Saliman often talks about how the CAAS should serve as a model for others seeking to establish centers at CU and notes the innovative nature of the center's structure. Can you talk about this and what makes the CAAAS so unique and successful?

You know, I want to begin by shouting out my brother, my friend, President Saliman. I really appreciate the very kind words he has said about the center. Even more than that, I appreciate his support. Not simply his professional support, but also just personally.

I have been working at the University of Colorado for nearly 20 years and he's the first president I've ever broken bread with, I've ever hung out and listened to jazz with and took a little road trip with. I mean, he is just really, really incredible. So I want to start with that. In terms of the uniqueness of the Center for African and African American Studies, I believe President Saliman is making a reference to the fact that it is not simply a research center.

We have three programs in the Center for African and African American Studies. We have a research program. We have an arts program, and we have a student service program. The fact that it's not simply a research center, that it has an arts program makes it unique. Now, it is doubly distinguished because it has a student service program.

So right now, Emily, I'm currently working with the brand new vice chancellor for student affairs, Dr. D'Andra Mull, my sister, who's just started here at the University of Colorado Boulder, and literally the Center for African and African American Studies, has a direct link or has built a bridge to the Division of Student Affairs and I don't know if you can name another center in the graduate school or even in the College of Arts and Sciences, or again, outside of the Division of Student Affairs that has that kind of daily, weekly, monthly link to student affairs.

So, Emily, if you haven't figured it out, I'm incredibly student focused. I'm whether I'm in the classroom or whether I'm in the center, I know that at the end of the day, this is really about students. It's about transforming them so that they can go out there and transform society.

Jumping back a bit, how did this center become a reality? If you can talk a little bit about how long the journey was to establish the CAAAS and what was that journey like?

I came here from Los Angeles, California, in 2005, and this idea for the center came with me. And in fact, Emily, when I interviewed here, I was shocked that there was no black cultural center. There was no Africa house. There was none of the things that they have at our peer institutions, other public universities have had centers like the one that I founded, they have had them since the 1960s.

But instead of sitting around criticizing my brand new employer, I hit the ground running. Rolled up my sleeves and began a serious campaign. Now, it took about 15 years for it to finally gain traction. For me to have the right president and the right chancellor and the right provost and the right dean and the right students who are really going to create a groundswell of support, encouragement, enthusiasm.

And Emily, you know, this is something that President Saliman knows well, this center was founded during the Black Lives Matter movement. So after Breonna Taylor and Sandra Bland and George Floyd, I wanted people to know that those of us at the University of Colorado felt very strongly about what was happening in the world, and we wanted to register that African-American lives matter and that, in fact, Emily, you already know this story, the students started a petition, right, of support, and it grew out of my Black Lives Matter movement seminar. And we got something like 1700 signatures while in support of the center at a time when we only had 800 black students on the entire campus.

On the Boulder campus. So that shows you up front the whole notion of us welcoming allies into this struggle to rescue and reclaim our humanity. That from day one, the center has always been built to share African-American history and culture with anybody, I repeat, anybody who wants to learn it. I mean, of course, that's what I've been doing in the classroom out here for nearly 20 years. Who do you think I've been teaching

African-American studies to in Boulder, Colorado? You know, I mean, the reality of the matter is, is that my interpretation of African American studies is that African American history is American history, right?

African-American culture is American culture. So, "long time coming" as Sam Cooke said. You know, I'm a musician, so I'm really into music. But it took about 15 years to get this thing off the ground. And I'm actually now Emily, helping the University of Colorado recruit and retain. Right? Recruit and retain. You know, now that I'm an administrator, you know, that's part of my job, if you will. But yeah, I'm really, really about letting folks know that this is a place this is a space to grow and develop to your fullest potential.

How does your work as director of the CAAAS inform your research, teaching and engagement with students and the community and vice versa?

Let me tell you that that's an incredible question. My current work focuses on black popular music, and I have been going around looking at the soundtracks of a lot of African-American social movements. Say, for instance, I wrote a book called Civil Rights Music where I looked at the soundtracks of the Civil Rights movement. The sequel was called Black Power Music, where I looked at soul and funk music as soundtracks to the Black Power movement.

And my most recent book is called Black Women's Liberation Music, where I looked at the music of the women's liberation movement, including Soul Sisters, black Feminist funk singers and Afro-disco divas like Donna Summer and Gloria Gaynor and Grace Jones and Diana Ross. So, that's one of the things, Emily, every year I get older and every year my students stay the same age, between 18 to 23.

But my ears are very young and I'm sitting up here listening to that new Beyonce, just like they're listening to the new Beyonce. I'm listening to some of that Taylor Swift, just like they listened to some of that Taylor Swift. I'm listening to that brand new Drake and Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar and all that. And you would be amazed at how it creates this kind of lingua franca. This kind of common language to where music is transgenerational, and I think that music is a universal language where in my classrooms I use it to bring people together.

Well, Emily, since I opened my center, we've had so many musicians come through, like some of them Grammy Award winning artists who've come through. We are co-sponsoring with CU Presents: The Artist Series, where we had Nobuntu, which is a Zimbabwean women's a cappella group in Macky Auditorium. They came, we co-sponsored them on February the second. We'll have Step Afrika, the South African Gumbo dancers coming.

And so for me, part of it is my work on the arts has really, really been amplified. I think that you already know my most popular the class is a course I teach in hip hop studies, 350 students. So and Emily, I want to point out now, only about 25 of those students are black students.

I'm just showing you and I'm sharing African-American culture, showcasing it, sharing it with anybody that wants to learn right, about this culture. And I need to tell you that there are so many of my students who come to me and they say, Dr. Rabaka, I never had a chance to do African American studies before I came to CU Boulder and that moves me very deeply, Emily, I welcome them into the space, understanding that much like me in high school and in junior high school, I didn't have a chance to, there was no African American studies courses, right, available. Right? And so I'm trying to be make my little contribution to the great state of Colorado by teaching, right, and sharing African-American studies with as many people that want to study it.

I'm just want you to know that this is a space, my classrooms and the center, these are dual spaces where we want to welcome people in. And let me say another thing that we say. Some people would be allies if we would simply give them an entry point. Right? If we would introduce them to why this is important. Right?

And we what we also have to do, or at least what I've tried to do, Emily, is disrupt oppression olympics. See, I'm not running around, sister, saying I'm more oppressed than you are. Well, we're both struggling with something. There is no human being, I feel like B.B. King, right, this is part of the blues esthetic, there is no

human being that comes through this life that does not suffer some setbacks, some tragedy, right, some hardships. And that's what makes me a radical humanist.

See, that's how I can connect with your humanity and anybody's humanity that steps into my classroom or steps into my center. I'm trying to connect on a human level. So for me, this transcends race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, even language. You know, I lecture all over the world, baby. So, you know, this is a universal message that I have. And I'm using African-American culture as the point of departure to share this whole brand new conception of social critique.

And Emily, I feel like because I'm consciously attempting to rescue and reclaim my humanity, there's something universal about it. There's students I have from Utah, from Wyoming, from Nevada, from California, from Illinois, from Arizona and New Mexico and Texas and so on, so forth.

Some of my students step into my classroom and they've never had somebody that really sees them as humans first. See their students to me second. I want to deal with their humanity first. I want to acknowledge and honor their humanity first. And when I do that, they also acknowledge their freaky and geeky professors' humanity. Feels so good today.

I love it. You're incredibly inspiring. I wouldn't call you freaking geeky, but I love that a lot.

I'm in Boulder, though. That's why I work. That's why the jazz musician in me works in Boulder, Colorado, for nearly 20 years right now, because I'm surrounded by freaking geeky people. CU Boulder, baby!

Oh, my God, this is the most fun. Okay, well, as you well know, February 1st marks the start of Black History Month. But this year it's also very special because it marks the first anniversary of the CAAAS day as officially proclaimed last year in 2023, by Colorado Governor Jared Polis. So can you talk about how has it has the center, how have you how have people around you grown this past year?

It was incredible to receive this kind of recognition from the governor and to be able to speak with the governor and to hear his words of encouragement for a brand-new Center for African-American Studies.

I don't have words to express what that means to me. Emily, I hope you can see right now that African-American studies is unique amongst academic disciplines because part of what an African-American studies professor and an African-American studies student is supposed to do, we are literally supposed to be bridges from the campus to the community. And that's why you can see, I'm always going out doing a lot of public facing work.

So what we're trying to do, Emily, is show people that the University of Colorado is a resource for all citizens.

In fact, I would like to think that I'm a part of a generation of students, faculty, staff, alumni, community members who we are making our own unique contribution, not simply to the University of Colorado, but to the great state of Colorado

I have faith this is how somebody like myself who came from the public housing projects can go from the public housing projects to the professoriate. It if that's not part of the American dream, nothing is.

I mean, I would like to poster person, right, for what's possible if you give people access to education, if you give people access to higher education. It was my ticket out of the ghetto and I'm still riding, baby.

I'm still up here. I'm knuckling and brawling every day and I still got that little chip on my shoulder, you know, from such a rough scrabble upbringing. But I've channeled it into something positive and this center is my gift to the University of Colorado Boulder. One of the things that President Saliman knows and supports is that I would like for this center to be here when I'm long gone.

That's why President Saliman and I and Chancellor DeStefano, we're working on building the endowment for the Center. That way, when we're long gone. Emily, this will be a gift that keeps on giving to successive generation of Buffs. Look at the longevity. Look at the vision that we have with this brand new center. And since you asked about it, we mark February the first, the first day of Black History Month.

That is the day the governor designated as the center for African and African American Studies Day. Governor Polis issued a proclamation. It is on our center's website. And every time my mother reads it, she messes up her mascara high school. I mean, can you imagine? I believe. And when you believe and you have opportunity, nothing is impossible.

We cannot rest on our laurels. We need to make sure that we, this center, the Center for African American Studies, has a ripple effect. This is what I've something I've spoken at length with President Saliman, we want to make sure that people understand, yes, the center is on the Boulder campus, but it's a resource for the entire CU system, right?

As you also know, I need to shout out my dear friends who happen to also be Regents. CU Regents, obviously my sweet sister, Wanda James, who we have been friends longer than she would like for me to publicly admit, but we have been friends since I got here to the great state of Colorado with her and her husband, Scott, my dear brother.

And so, again, I think that this is what I mean by creating this center has brought me into contact. It's gotten me out of my comfort zone of just being sort of a professor, right. And I'm interacting more and more with community members, with Regents and just different folks. It's a beautiful experience. And the fact that I'm doing this from Boulder. Come on!

Some people think that since first we got a new head coach here, Coach Prime and myself, we've got some strong African-American athletics and some strong African-American academics. People say, Brother, now is that an HBCU? That means historically black university? And I said, No, no, it's not. What we are doing is showing y'all the best of the public university tradition. Meaning everybody ought to be included. Everybody ought to feel a sense of belonging at a public university. That's what makes it public!

What would you like to CU community and beyond, to know about the CAAAS and how can students, faculty, staff and community members get involved with the center?

One of the things I'd like for them to know is that the center could also be called the Center for Building the Beloved Community. When I say beloved community, I'm obviously inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And the beloved community is a space where everybody is accepted, they are respected, they are protected. Now, imagine that kind of world. Emily, I know you're going to say I'm utopian. I know you're going to say I'm sounding like John Lennon. One of my musical idols, who said, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will live as one. Imagine."

This center is about reimagining Boulder. Reimagining Colorado. Reimagining the United States of America. In fact, reimagining the entire world. I still believe and a little bit of fantasy. I still believe that dreams can come true. And I'm trying to encourage people to keep dreaming.

But even more than that, do the work to turn your dreams into your reality. For me, that's how I got from the projects, right from the projects to the professor. Well, once I dream that big dream that one day I want to grow up to be like Martin Luther King. See Emily, I thought he was a medical doctor.

I didn't know what a PhD., I being honest with you. I didn't know what a Ph.D. was. And when they explained it to me. Right. And all the work it takes to do that, I made up my mind. I didn't know how. Nobody my family has ever gone to a college or university. And I want to share with you right now, candidly, Emily, I have spent more time in the American Academy than I have anywhere else.

So I'm quite I mean, this is home now. I mean, this is a second home, but I feel quite comfortable. And the fact that I'm in I'm on a campus where they sort of welcome my difference, my contributions, I mean, you couldn't have told me that that was possible. I didn't know that that was possible when I got here in 2005. But transformation, right? Transformation. We have agency, Emily. We all do. We can change things.

I'm fixing to tip the scales. And you know, I've been doing that for a long time, right? And it's working. Yeah, just such an incredible experience, I think, building this center. This is my life's work. This is my legacy.

Well Dr. Rabaka, is there anything else, before we sign off, is there anything else you would like to say or you want people to know about you, your work or the center?

You know what, Emily? I would just like to close out with this that everybody has a contribution to make to building the beloved community.

Right? A space that everybody's included. Nobody's excluded. I honestly believe and when I say that, Emily, I need to roll call. Some of the folks I'm really I've got top of mind. I'm talking about women, I'm talking about queer folk, I'm talking about trans folk. I'm talking about people with different abilities and so-called disabilities. I'm talking about working class people and underclass people. I'm talking about immigrants and indigenous people.

That's the kind of University of Colorado that that we are creating, right? This is the one, right, that that image, that beloved community in Boulder. And in fact, Emily, sometimes I joke when I go out to give my public lectures and I say, I teach at the University of Colorado at the beloved community.

You're saying so instead of Boulder, right? This is the University of Colorado beloved community. I'm trying to build something where love is the ethos. Love is the common culture. In fact, I want to speak with love laced words. Enough hate, right, in the world. There's enough negativity, there's enough ugly. I want to bring in some beauty in the world. And I want to everybody that listens to this podcast to bring some beauty into this world.

Dr. Rebaka, what a privilege this has been. Thank you so much. You're incredible. And I think we all I don't know how anybody listening to this doesn't want to go out and do some good now. So thank you. Thank you so much.

Thank you.

It was a wonderful conversation.

I appreciate the opportunity. Seriously, thank you for using your platform. I think it's really, really important. Right? I think that this is important for all of us sort of use our platforms like this. Hey, we could change the world. I'm telling you, we could change the world.

Absolutely. And it sounds like you already are. So thank you. Thank you for everything you bring to the world.